

Burnout

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Burnout

by [ChainsawViolin](#)

Summary

In the aftermath of Nayshall and having his life upended, Ken completely falls apart, leaving a bewildered and guilty Ryu to try and remedy the situation

Notes

Purely in terms of construction/motif, I view this one as a sort of cousin to Jack-In-The-Box (and, I suppose, a lot of my stuff) using an unconventional fetishistic act as a form of obtuse caretaking.

I'll admit I don't remember where the hell this idea came from in the beginning, but I feel like based on 6's story they're building toward Ken having some sort of breakdown after Nayshall. I think it's interesting that Ryu's perspective is partly rational in the sense of 'if Ken wants space I won't force my presence on him, we're both adults and I can't just charge into his life willy-nilly' and ridiculous in the sense of 'my deepest friend's entire life and support system was overturned, no need to make sure he's okay!' it's an interesting slant that makes Ryu seem both mature and stupid. Generally speaking, his sort of character is one I have a hard time writing (more in his 6 iteration where he's cooled down a lot) so I hope this doesn't feel out of character for him

Ryu sat in the same place he always did, atop a little platform of rock. It matched the stiffness of his posture as he meditated in silence. Whether they approached him in the middle of meditation or during his continued training, he always had that aura of rigid serenity about him. It lent him even more of a mysterious air.

They approached the man with careful steps. “Master?” They said, “I’m here for more training.”

His eyes snapped open, and for a moment, they’d swear they had actually taken him by surprise. But that couldn’t be right, Ryu was never surprised. From what they had seen of him, he took everything in stride.

“Very well, then.” He rose to his feet and regarded the newcomer with a nod. “Let’s see how you’ve improved since last time.”

Truthfully, Ryu hadn’t been expecting them. No need to shoo them away, though. He’d grown comfortable with their presence. He still wasn’t sure about how he felt toward the epithets of ‘student’ and ‘master,’ but he’d chosen not to argue the matter.

As he stepped from his perch, he glanced momentarily back at the stone, before sliding his feet into position. “Whenever you feel ready.”

The two were quickly entangled in a spar. Ryu took a slightly more defensive approach, more interested in reacting to his mentee’s actions and taking note of the techniques they chose to use. Moments he could have responded with a blow were left unused and open, only letting strikes skim his forearm or shin and be carefully brushed away instead of properly countered. Attempts to push him back against their little battlefield were unimpeded. Ryu simply allowed them to come.

Though the thrill of a fight typically brought up their spirits, today, something wasn’t quite right. While he could feel their intention through their blows, it was obvious enough in their expression that this wasn’t making them happy. Something personal? Had they sought him out for a different kind of advice? Hard to say.

He saw how the worry lines in their face gradually deepened and darkened into an irritated scowl. Their posture and technique turned sloppier, simple careless slips turning into poorly-aimed strikes that didn’t so much as graze what they were aiming for. Anger bled into their movements. Ryu knew what that looked like from years of tempering his own.

The very moment he expected them to have an outburst, however, they paused, taking in a deep breath and steadying themselves. Regardless of what was going on, he was happy to think that his meditation techniques had rubbed off on them.

“Is something bothering you today, Master Ryu?” They asked.

Of everything he’d expected them to say, that was not one of them. The problem was with him? “I’m perfectly fine. What makes you ask?”

They frowned. “You’re not...”

Whatever thought they had trailed off. Ryu made a little noise in the back of his throat to encourage them. “No need to hesitate. There’s nothing wrong with speaking your mind.”

Despite that, they floundered for several more moments in thought. “You just...don’t seem all that focused. I wasn’t sure if something was on your mind, or- or if you were having a problem, or...”

Ryu found himself unable to reply at first. Now he was the one floundering for his words. “I see. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to offer what you were hoping for.”

“It’s fine, I-” His student sighed in annoyance. “Maybe this wasn’t a good idea. I don’t want to bother you if you’re right in the middle of something. I hope it clears up for you, whatever it is. I’ll come back some other time, alright?”

“If you would prefer. Be well, and train often. I look forward to our next lesson.”

Once they had vanished into the brush, Ryu’s severe expression softened. He turned to the outcropping of rock on his right side.

“Am I distracted...?” He asked the empty grounds. The thought hadn’t crossed his mind. It wasn’t wholly unsurprising, but he had thought he’d done well to keep that strictly internal. He’d often been told his naturally-stern face didn’t tend to reflect his inner thoughts, but his features were not immovably frozen. It was entirely possible that something had slipped through without him trying. Ryu hoped he hadn’t inadvertently insulted them, thinking he didn’t care about their training.

Finding himself lost in thought, he sat back down on the stone. From the menagerie of candles and jars, he selected a seemingly-random container and scrutinized it. Rather than any sort of wick, it housed a small fragment of coal, one tip glowing an uneasy orange-red. He set the jar down in his lap.

“What do you think?”

The closest thing to a response he was given was the wind whistling in the trees. He sighed. With one hand keeping the container steady, his free arm felt along the border of the platform, searching and finding a little pile of leaf litter that had been gathered recently. Ryu eased a few dry leaves and twigs into the jar, nudging them toward the bottom where the glowing fragment sat. “Eat it slowly, if you can. I don’t want you to burn too much all at once.”

The edges of the leaf nearest to it tinted orange-brown as the little flame spread to it. Ryu merely watched on. It never quite burst into flame, but a faint glow slowly overtook the surface, pinprick glimmers eating through the lobes and making the edges curl until it was little more than a black husk twisted into itself. Once it was gone, the kindling spread to the next leaf closest to it.

“Does that feel a bit better, Ken?”

Ryu knew he would get no response, but in spite of it, the silence made his heart grow heavier.

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It had been...well, he couldn't quite remember how long it had truly been since he and Ken had crossed paths. The day-to-day had fallen to the wayside. It wasn't as though they'd never gone stretches of time apart. Even as younger men, Ken would take months to conduct business in America, go on a romantic fling, or do some training, and they'd catch up as though they had just seen each other yesterday. Growing up together made that sort of thing easy. Their individual travels helped them change and grow, but very little of it could change the fundamentals of who they were as people.

This shouldn't have been any different. Maybe a few more months than usual. Ryu hadn't overthought it. Maybe Ken had been busy with family matters. Maybe he himself had spent a little too long at the temple without traveling, giving them an excuse to bump into each other, as they were oddly prone to doing. To be quite honest, he hadn't thought much about it at all.

Did that make this all his fault? It was a thought he came back to regularly. Ryu had never been the sort of person to fixate on things that weren't tangible, weren't practical thoughts to have. It had become much harder to do so as of late. He couldn't recall the last time he had felt so conflicted. Whiling away on thoughts of '*could have, should have*' had come far too easily to him, and it took much more effort than he would have expected to try and shoo away.

(He'd guiltily admit, more than a few times now, he hadn't put much effort into trying, and simply let it sat. Maybe he did deserve the guilt.)

He and Ken hadn't spoken in a while. It was simply a statement of fact. Ryu hadn't thought much of it. Not until he had been awoken in the middle of the night by the chime of his phone. In the moment, he had almost chosen to leave it, instead responding at a more reasonable hour, but some inexplicable urge had pushed him out of his bedroll and fumbling for the noisy glow.

No caller ID, no header information, no clue who was sending a message or how they had gotten his phone number to begin with, and just two words-

Help me

Ryu had immediately gathered his things, throwing down a king's ransom for the fastest and most direct flight available to America. He didn't know what was wrong, but that didn't matter. He understood. He already understood. His best friend was in danger, and he would be no friend at all if he did not come to aid him.

Metro City was not a place he was intimately familiar with, but he had a suspicion that it was where he would find who he was looking for. The search began immediately. Any connections he could find, he ripped up by the root and wrung everything he could from it. This level of haste was something he'd avoid in most better circumstances, but this was not a better circumstance.

Likewise, on a better day, it would have been a pleasant opportunity to catch up with old faces. He encountered several on the prowl, some more intentionally than others. His search for familiar faces revealed that Honda had since opened a profitable restaurant in the city. In better times, Ryu would have spent the afternoon expressing his respect for the man's good fortune and work ethic, sitting down to partake in a meal, but the circumstances were too dire to waste time. Honda hadn't been able to offer any useful information, but he bid his old acquaintance farewell and good luck.

In more than one moment, Ryu wondered how absurd he had to look, tearing around the streets of Metro City like a man gone mad, asking practically anyone if they had even spotted someone who vaguely looked like his missing friend. Of course he knew that most wouldn't, but his initial attempts had been so unsuccessful, he had started to become desperate. Metro City was a large place, but his continued failures had still felt like an inexplicable anomaly. If his intuition was even slightly correct, he should have found Ken hours ago. So why...

When the realization finally hit him, Ryu had to hold back the urge to smack himself. He knew what Ken was like and what he would do. But that was just the problem. Ken *wasn't* thinking like Ken. Which meant that all of his memories of Ken's typical self were useless.

He took to the alleyways with renewed fervor. If he couldn't deduce where Ken was, then he would have to check everywhere. He'd gladly overturn every stone in this city if it meant securing his friend's safety.

Seventy-four. He had counted. Seventy-four roads slithering through the city's half-hidden districts. No sign of Ken. The sense of worry (and the near-constant running) had made his chest start to ache. Even with the fastest flight he could afford, it had still taken hours to fly there. How long had Ken been alone? How long had he been suffering?

(And how long, even before then? If Ryu had thought to reach out before, would it have saved them both from all of this?)

How funny it was. So much time spent overturning the city, and Ryu had been so distracted, the voice had taken him entirely by surprise.

"Ry...yu...?"

Broken, soft, but undeniably Ken. Relief flooded Ryu like a wave. He turned to embrace his friend, and, childish as it was, cling on for some time.

He took a single step and stopped.

Ken had needed help. What Ryu hadn't expected, though, was the deep scarlet eyes replacing soft blues, and an eerie aura licking the air where Ken currently stood. The ends of his hair floated in place, like he'd been rolled in static, but the more Ryu stared, the more clear it became that the tips had gone a harsh white.

His eyes widened. "No."

That glow. He knew it painfully well. The Satsui no Hado.

Getting closer was a danger, but Ryu couldn't stop himself. He was too worried to care. "Ken? Ken, how did this happen?"

His prior confusion suddenly sank into deep bafflement. What had happened to Ken in his absence that he'd plummeted to such a low? What could have twisted him into something so unlike himself? It couldn't have been Bison, Bison was supposed to be *dead*. One of his underlings? A Bison-wannabe? Who else could possibly be responsible? What could have pushed Ken, happy-go-lucky, offbeat Ken, into...*this*?

Despite how unguarded he had left himself, Ken continued to stand and stare at Ryu instead of attack. Was he fighting back against it? It may have explained why Metro City wasn't already covered in the rubble of violent, reckless fighting, but...even that seemed incorrect. The corrupting touch of the Satsui no Hadou was a river of dark energy, sending every muscle fiber the power to destroy that it desperately urged the mind to succumb to. It was a vicious high. Ryu knew all too well, it had been the most invigorated he had been in his life, as though he could cross a continent in one leap and split the ground in two with a heel. In spite of all that, the clear paleness of his hair and tint to his sclera, the expression on Ken's face was unmistakably pure exhaustion.

"Ken...?" Ryu said, unable to mask the touch of fear in his voice. Part of him wished that Ken would throw a punch. That they could just fight this out. The Satsui was something he could at least understand. He had *some* idea of how to approach it, how to try and combat it. What was this? How could he even begin to comprehend it?

The moment he brushed his friend's shoulder, Ken shuddered and pulled away. "No- "

The unexpected strength felt a lot more fitting to the Satsui no Hado that Ryu knew, but he was still struggling to understand why and how that strength was not currently being used to try and beat him into the concrete. Would...would it be *better* if he tried to force it? Just an answer, that was all he wanted, just an explanation for any of this.

Ryu threw his arms around Ken's shoulders, bracing himself to be shoved away again. Instead, he could feel Ken starting to tremble.

"No, don't- " He gasped "don't look at me- "

Good- that was good, wasn't it? Ken could listen. Maybe he could talk him out of this.

"It's alright, Ken, I'm here." Ryu held on tighter, still keeping ready on the off chance he was shoved away after all. "I'm here. It's alright." His fingers gripped a material he wasn't familiar with, ragged and weather-worn. Even Ken's clothing was so alien in Ryu's eyes now. What had he become?

"No, I can't, it's too much- "

Trembling deepened into the full-body shudders of restrained crying. Ryu hated to see his friend like this, but he would be there for him, no matter what.

'But what was stopping you before?' His thoughts asked him. *'What took you so long?'*

Even bracing himself, the force that pushed back against him nearly threw Ryu to the ground. He scrambled back against it, grabbing at whatever he could to keep Ken from fleeing.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you, Ken. I’m not letting go.”

“I can’t- I *can*’t- “

“You *can*, Ken, I know you can.” He clung onto his friend’s wrists as he tried to pull away once more. “You’re strong. You’re so strong, I know you are.”

He felt Ken jerk as he gasped for air. “Not enough- not- like you- “

“You are! You’ve worked just as hard as I have. Harder, even! You’ve had to keep training even with your son- your wife- !” The urge to shake his old friend was almost insurmountable, as though it would somehow knock some sense and vigor back into him, make him more resemble the Ken Ryu had known for decades. “You can do it, stay strong, just- “

“I can’t...I can’t...I can’t do it anymore- “

As Ryu tried to increase his grip, the flesh beneath his fingers...sank. That was the only way he could think to describe it. Under Ken’s coat sleeves, the firmness of muscle and skin gave way more like clay than flesh.

“Ken! What- what’s wrong?? I don’t understand- !”

Ken’s head lolled back toward the sky, uncaring of how he was staring directly at the sun through the narrow slit of the rooftops.

“I’m...so...tired...”

The strange softness continued, and Ryu suddenly found himself clutching little more than fabric.

“Ken? Ken?!”

Ken was gone. All that remained were his clothes, and a strange, sooty substance that spilled from the sleeves into little dunes on the concrete.

“*KEN*?!”

Ryu couldn’t recall the last time he’d been in such a panic. His stoic demeanor had been discarded as he desperately tried to grasp anything that had just occurred, even though he had watched it all right in front of him. He practically tore apart the grubby, dusty fabric trying to find something, anything that would help him make sense of things. All that greeted him was more ash-dust, spilling out of places where flesh was supposed to be. Where *Ken* was supposed to be.

Unable to stop himself, Ryu whipped a fist out in the direction of the nearest breakable thing. It found a dimly-lit vending machine. The metal buckled under the force and nearly bent in

half, sprinkling broken glass onto the concrete. Ryu bundled the ragged material of Ken's clothing in his arms, feeling his shoulders start to shake.

The tiniest, faintest little rattling noise struck the ground by his feet, hardly audible over the blood pounding in his ears. When he looked down, he was met with an odd sight- no small feat, given how bizarre today had been already. Sitting by his sandal was a tiny fragment of some pitch-looking substance, like a chunk of fireplace coal. But still glowing. Still alight. So small, barely anything at all, but that tiny light still persisted, gentle orange wavering against the dull concrete.

Ryu knelt to the ground. He held his breath. After a moment's reluctance, he reached out and picked up the strange light. He could feel the tiniest bit of heat radiate from it, enough to be felt, but far from unbearable. He cradled the little cinder with the most painstaking gentleness, like even the smallest touch would make it crumble to dust like the rest of his friend.

"Ken?" He asked the thing in his hand. "Oh, Ken..."

It flickered feebly, barely hot enough to warm his skin.

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The jar thumped gently against his ribs whenever the terrain grew rougher. Ryu took it as an unspoken reminder of its presence. Though the constant tap-tap-tap made for a minor nuisance, its presence soothed him through miles of thickets.

"Oh, look at that, in the trees." Ryu paused between steps and pointed at one of the hillsides in the distance. "I think that might be a raicho. Do you see it?"

And again, no response. He hadn't expected one. Speaking aloud simply made him feel more at ease. How odd. Training and traveling in silence had never been uncomfortable for him before, but now, the silence was deafening unless he filled it with some kind of idle chatter.

"I remember there used to be a nest of them, not far from Master Gouken's dojo. We tried to climb the tree it was in. The mother wasn't fond of us shaking the branches. Do you remember that?"

That was what they did. It was how he filled the empty space. Retreading the worn paths of their childhood, falling into the comforting arms of old nostalgia in a desperate attempt to feel normal again. Perhaps it served no use. Perhaps this was an entirely childish nothing, grasping at kiddie comforts to feel as though he had some sort of control over a world that had suddenly become too massive and confusing to tolerate. It was all he could think to do.

Pathetic. How pathetic he was. All this training, and for what? What good did it do him now? Punches only solved so many problems.

In the past, when he encountered a problem that fighting couldn't solve, he'd turn to his brother-in-training for advice. Particularly when it came to anything to do with communication. It was something he'd envied about Ken, even as a child. Conversations just

came so...*easily* to him. Granted, it was something that often got him in trouble, but it never stopped Ryu from feeling a sense of jealousy. He sometimes wished he could be more like Ken- confident, intuitive, hardly ever hesitating before throwing himself headlong into situations with a smile. Master of off-the-cuff, not a plan in his head but finding his way through instinct like he'd had one from the start.

A thought had intruded on his mind, now several times despite being shooed away. The urge would come to take the ember and put it in his mouth. Ryu was perfectly aware of how absurd it was. It always returned before long. He didn't know which would happen, that the heat would burn his tongue, or that his saliva would snuff the light out entirely. Neither sounded pleasant. Some part of him wondered if that ephemeral essence, whatever flicker of Ken that still existed in the fire could be passed elsewhere. If he could somehow, through some inexplicable means, take that essence into himself. To merge them into a single entity.

It was another thought he'd contemplated, long before now. The two of them had been raised like brothers for nearly as long as they could remember. There were moments, memories, secrets that nobody else but Ken knew. To even call him 'brother' at times felt like too casual a term. He didn't know a better one. A foolish thought, a pointless one, but it would often come regardless, the sentiment of how little would truly change if they were actually blood-kin.

No, but that would change things, to have them differ so much. Ryu couldn't imagine which of them would be the eldest. They would still challenge one another, but one would always be first in the back of their minds. Perhaps, then, there was another option- tangled together in the warmth of their collective mother, intertwined long before they had even come into the world. To share even the same set of genetics, down to every cell. Exactly the same. That even if they were separated, he could simply look in a mirror and feel comforted.

The slight heat against his chest pulled Ryu from his daydreaming. His hand patted the glass through his kasaya, and he continued to hike up the hilltop. There was a campsite there that he would frequent during the warm season. Ken had accompanied him there a few times during his visits, though always complaining about the lumpy path up to it and how shabby the mats at the site were, compared to the bed he had at home (the latter always said with a note of teasing. The mats *were* less soft than a bed, but he and Ryu had grown up making themselves comfortable on ones like those, and even the more threadbare ones brought about a sense of nostalgia)

Nightfall would come faster than he expected, it always did. Ryu found the site's stash of stored food and found a pot to cook with. He kept the jar close by as he approached the edge of the woods and gathered enough sticks to last a short fire's worth. The only noise to hear was the rustle of wood against wood and the sound of dry rice being scooped. Not even the animals called to one another.

"My cooking isn't as good as Master Gouken's, but I'll still try my hardest."

Ken remained his silent companion through the entire process. How wrong it felt, not having his complaints toward the weather, impatience for the food, and random chatter to fill the space. There was supposed to be noise.

There was supposed to be so much noise.

Once the wind had cooled the rice just enough to be touched, Ryu scooped it out and spread it flat. Palmfuls of sticky rice were compressed in his calloused hands, with a few scattered flakes of dried salmon folded inside, forming the messy shape of a triangle. Several were pressed into man-sized portions, then he began moving more carefully to shape the individual grains with his fingers. When the rice was packed together, Ryu selected the littlest one and placed it just inside the jar. Compared to the others, it was practically doll-sized, but stuffing in too much all at once threatened to snuff the light out. He nudged it carefully until it was within reach, just as the leaves had been.

“Here, Ken. This is for you.”

A tiny glow licked at the individual grains, slowly blackening them one-by-one. Part of him wondered if the fuel source made any difference. Another part of him hoped he could enjoy the taste.

Ryu settled with a sigh, taking his own rice ball and staring off over the sun-brushed cliffside. It was a beautiful sky, but his vision sat firmly on his hands, already disinterested in the food he had just made. Ryu had hiked up here alone before, plenty of times. He had enjoyed a meal in solitude and watched the sunset by himself. This wasn't unfamiliar. It shouldn't have felt so empty.

He was supposed to have grown. Matured. He wasn't a young man anymore, but wasn't that supposed to make him feel more secure? How was it that he only felt more lost?

Ken had grown. He always had. Someone had once quipped that he was such a prodigy, he'd learn something new by the time you turned around. Even with 'normal' things, Ken was always too fast for Ryu to keep up. He had never dated anyone, while Ken had become a married father in the blink of an eye. Fighting was one matter. They were always equals on the battlefield. Beyond that, Ryu had very little. It hadn't bothered him so much until recently. He wondered if he could ever fathom catching up. But here he was, here they both were. Burnt to the wick with nothing to show for it.

Was Ken even sentient in this form? Was he even truly *alive*? Was anything he saw as a response or reaction just delusional pretend-play that his imagination conjured up to comfort himself? There was nobody around to tell him. Perhaps that had also been a subconscious choice on his part. That made for a fascinating little quirk of living in solitude. It was supposed to be a way of meditating, keeping one's mind sharp. But it was just as easy to talk to nobody after long enough. After all, there was nobody nearby to tell him he'd gone crazy. Maybe he was already far past that line. He just hadn't realized it until now.

“...I don't know what it will take.” Ryu sighed, setting his food aside. “I don't know what to do.”

It brought him no relief to say that. He wished that Ken would reply, like there were some magic string of words he could utter to turn Ken back to normal. But even if he did, where would that leave him? Ryu would still have something to answer for. This may have never

happened to begin with if he hadn't let the time slip away. He didn't know if Ken would ever forgive him for it. Ryu certainly knew he couldn't forgive himself.

"I don't know what I have to do to fix this. Or- or even if I can. Maybe all I can do is sit and wait until you heal on your own terms. I don't know. I just don't know." Ryu sighed. "This is beyond me. We've seen some strange things, haven't we? But nothing like this..."

He gathered the jar and let it rest in his lap, stroking it plaintively with a hand. "Either way, no matter what...I'll be right here with you, Ken. Right by your side, waiting as long as it takes. Whatever happens, I'm here. I'm here. "

For just a moment, as he watched, Ryu would swear the little cinder twinkled in reply. But it might have just been the sun glinting off the glass.

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